

ASIFA EAST

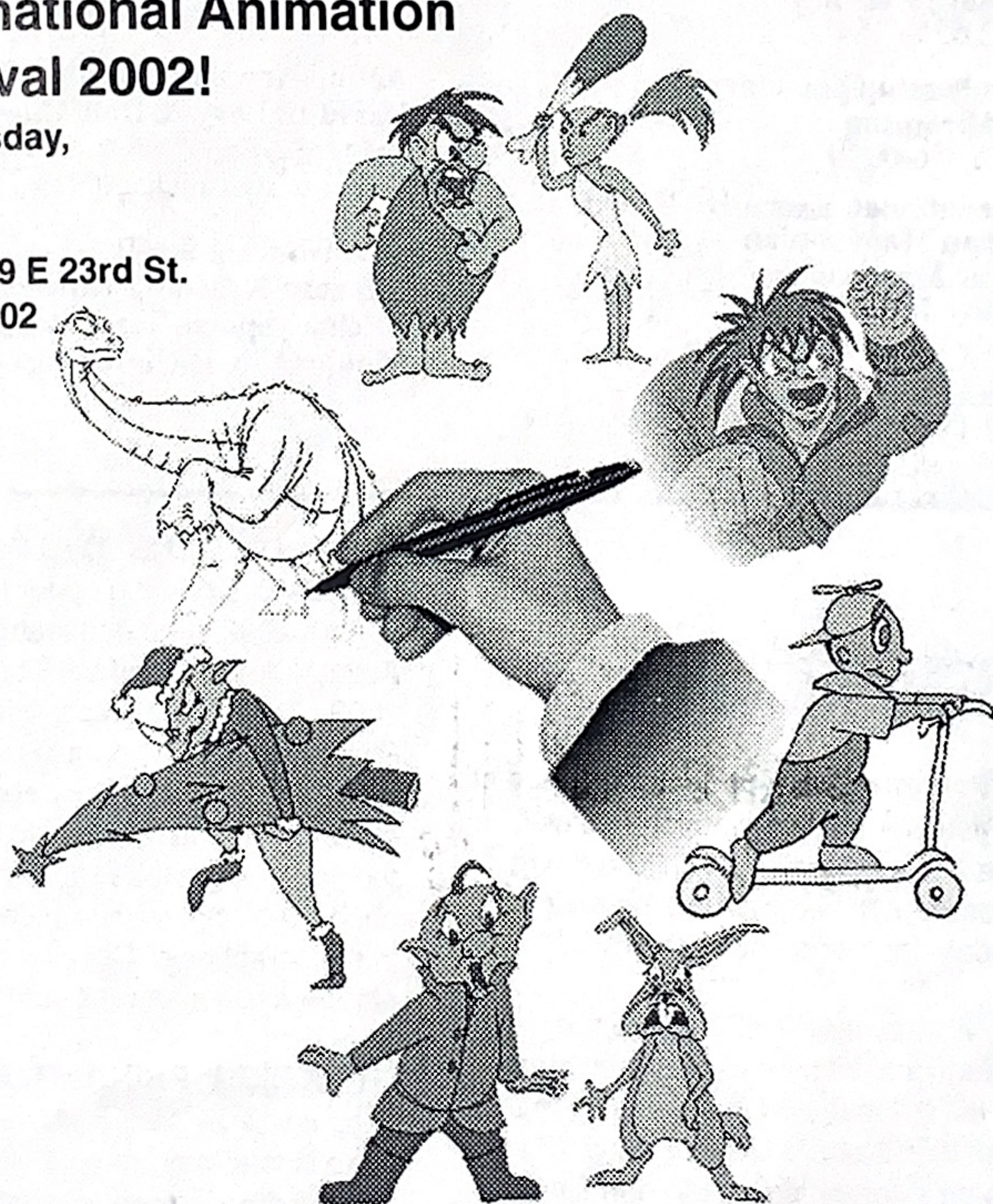
The International Animated Film Society

ANIMATOR

June 2003 Issue

**ASIFA EAST June Event :
The Best of The Ottawa
International Animation
Festival 2002!**

Wednesday,
June 25
7 PM
SVA 209 E 23rd St.
Room 502



Rich Gorey

**Exclusive Inside Coverage of ASIFA-East's
34th Annual Animation Festival !**

ASIFA East

The International Animated Film
Society Northeast / New York Chapter
A Program of the New York Foundation For The Arts

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Bill Plympton will be a featured judge at this year's Annecy Animation Festival, June 2-7 in Annecy, France. Inquiring minds want to know: will he be eating freedom fries when he's there?

Bill will then appear at the Newport International Film Festival in Newport, RI. Bill will take part in an animation panel discussion on Friday, June 13 and present a screening of his short films and clips from "Hair High" on Saturday, June 14.

"MUTANT ALIENS" DVD DETAILS

Indie DVD is gearing up for the release of Bill's 2002 animated feature "Mutant Aliens", on DVD and VHS on July 1, 2003. The DVD extras will include "The Plympton Diaries", a multi-part behind-the-scenes documentary about the making of the film, and also a trailer for the upcoming "Hair High". For more info, check out: <http://www.indiedvd.com/> in the scrapbook. Check it out at: <http://www.plymptoons.com>

"HAIR HIGH" PRODUCTION UPDATE

Production on "Hair High" is scheduled to wrap in late May, so your last chance to see Bill drawing scenes from the film live on the Ani-Cam is coming up. The Ani-Cam is active most weekdays, from 10 am to 6 pm, New York time.



The Year In Review

In the 2002-2003 season, Asifa-East continued to be one of the most active of all Asifa Chapters in the world! I'm proud to present our year-in review...

September- We opened the new Asifa season with our usual crowd pleasing event, the Open Screening. We had a handful of premieres including the new Emily Hubley film, "Set, Set, Spike" and thesis films by Christi Bertelson and Alisa Harris, to name a few. At our September Executive Board Meeting Richard Gorey's bottle of red and a bottle of white wine quickly became a monthly tradition. Next year, Rich promises a choice of beer, wine, or sangria.

October- We paid tribute to one of our own, legendary stop-motion animator, John Gati, who died on July 30, 2002. He was a founding member of ASIFA East and a beloved member of the board. Howard Beckerman led us through the event thrown in John's honor. It was a night of fond memories and fine films. In the October newsletter, Richard Gorey, utilizing research and conversations with Michael Sporn and Tissa David, unveiled the first part of his two part essay on the making of the feature, Raggedy Ann and Andy. Rich also provided a comprehensive review of the new book on Asifa's own David Ehrlich, David Ehrlich: Citizen Of The World. A dose of international flavor was provided by Biljana Labovic and her excellent coverage of Zagreb 2002.

November- Ever wonder what it would be like to combine a private eye story with a fairy tale motif? Well, wonder no longer. We were proud to present the premiere of Debra Solomon's Cartoon Network special, Private Eye Princess. Our friends at the Cartoon Network (thanks Linda!) co-sponsored the wine and vittles. Debra couldn't celebrate for too long, however, because soon she was busy creating the animation for the Lizzy McGuire movie. Cheers, Debra!

December- We found out what it means to be pitch perfect at our pitch workshop with animation agent extraordinaire, Jim Arnoff. Jim was flanked by his young client, Todd Broder, and MTV Development Exec., John Priemer. Cautionary tales were told, questions were answered, hugs were exchanged. Now, we'll all get to sell shows of our own! Right? Right? Who turned out the lights? In the newsletter, Bill Plympton explained why he was in Tenerife, Spain. Here's a hint: Animation Festival. Michael Sporn wrote on the spirituality that's missing in some animated features of late.

January- One year after the big premiere event for Howard Beckerman's book, *Animation, The Whole Story*, Howard once again shared a delightful evening with us. This time it was for his presentation, "At Home With Mickey and Minnie." The subject was the often under appreciated supporting player of animation, background art. Howard showed slides and films that helped us bring the backgrounds front and center. I was especially pleased with this event because we don't acknowledge (often enough) all the supporting artists that work in animation. Hurray for background artists and designers! Also in January were two very important MOMA animation events that we were pleased to throw our support behind. One honored the lovely work that's been coming out of R.O. Bleckman's Ink Tank for decades. The other event, hosted by John Canemaker, honored local animation legend Tissa David. The weather may have been cold, but these were two of the warmest evenings in memory.

Letter from the President (continued)

February- Local boy made good-Tom Warburton sat still long enough to answer our questions for the newsletter. For all of you living under a rock, or without TV (same thing), Tom debuted his series *Code Name: Kids Next Door* on Cartoon Network this past Fall. Most surprising Tom fact: Tom was glad that his first pilot for Cartoon Network wasn't picked to go to series. Rich Gorey presented some animator's stories for consumption. Among the brave animators sampled were Tony Peters, David Ehrlich, Candy Kugel, and Andrea Brietman. Nancy Lennert wrote the FAQ (frequently asked questions) list about our Asifa-East Animation festival. The one question she neglected to include was, "Can I enter my dog into the festival?" Cheers to Signe Baumann on her first annual Filthy Fest. To see exclusive coverage of the event, check out "The Real Cancun" (playing in theatres near you). Seriously, her animation festival of "adult" animation was sold out for two consecutive shows.

March- Many wary souls made it to all three evenings of jury screenings for our 34th Annual Animation Festival. The mood was competitive....but, it was nice to see that two pieces that were cut short in judging resulted in wins at the festival. Hey, you never know.

April- At our April event, SNL's Saturday Evening Funhouse creator, Robert Smigel let us peek into his creative process. The crowd leaned forward as Smigel laid out the details of a recent cancelled cartoon that was halted in mid-process due to up-to-the-minute changes in Gulf War 2. For the record, the lost cartoon involved bees....and Dubya was going to smoke out their queen. Smigel was assisted in his presentation by two of his cartoon makers' David Wachtenhiem and Robert Marianetti, who's company is called, coincidentally, Wachtenhiem/Marianetti Animation. In the newsletter, Trevor Wooley shared his views on *The Animatrix* shorts and the *CowBoy Bebop* feature. His verdict? They both could use more cow-bell. Richard Gorey went back to school with the creators of MTV's *Clone High*. Dolly, the sheep, could not be reached for a comment at press time. Michael Sporn compared and contrasted the strange bedfellows of the animated Oscar this year, *Spirited Away* and *The Chubb Chubbs*. If you liked *The Chubb Chubbs*, be sure and catch next years, *Chubb Chubbs Two: Electric Boogaloo*.

May- Our Show of Shows! The 34th Asifa-East Animation Festival! Our kind friend Richard Gorey provided the memorable festival opening (see artwork on the cover!). Thanks, Xeth Fienberg, for the awesome flyer design! Mike Overbeck tested the limits of our insurance when he jumped onto the stage this year to claim his best in show award. All seemed to approve our newly revamped festival. For a change, we presented the awards for a category and then presented the winning films of that category. In addition to this, we had slates reminding the audience what prize the film was selected for. We aim to please. The party that followed was a blast! Be sure to check out the full coverage of the festival in this issue. Congrats to all the winners! Also in May, we announced our commitment to giving Asifa-East the website it's always deserved. Please contact our snazzy new webmaster, Andrea Brietman if you'd like to lend a hand.

June- Join us as we screen the best of Ottawa 2002! We've already got lots of exciting events lined up for the fall, including the return of the Open Screening and the Animation Art Auction. Check-books at the ready! See ya next year.

VIEW POINT NIEM

COMPLAINING by Michael Sporn

Complaining has become a world sport. Everyone seems to have something to complain about or to blame on others. Obviously, this applies to the world of animation, as well as anything else. The industry – so strong for so long, then suddenly weak – has let many, if not most of its workers, go. There isn't a lot of work and artists, like a lot of other workers, are out on the street.

Back in 1972, when I tried to enter the industry, it would have been funny calling it an industry. They were still calling the work "seasonal" back then. It always seemed to me that there were only two seasons: the busy season and the out-of-work season. Back then most of the studios were a number of small companies where ads were produced. NY was the place for commercials, and that's pretty much all that was going on. There were the infrequent bursts of quick, short, low-budget spots for *SESAME STREET* or *THE ELECTRIC CO* where people could be creative. These are what got me into the business – working on *LETTERMAN* for the Hubley Studio.

It was there that I learned a work ethic that I've carried to the present. It was there that I got to work close to John Hubley, one of the greatest designer/directors animation has seen. (He'd become my hero after the first film of his I'd seen in 1962.) It was there that I got to meet my first animators – and what a pair they were. Tissa David was the first real animator I met, and she's still the greatest actor-with-a-pencil I've known. The second animator, and the first I got to inbetween, was Johnny Gentilella. To most young people today, he's an unknown, but to the world of 1972 he was a force. Johnny had animated many if not most of the Popeye cartoons in NY; there he was working for Hubley.

I can't tell you how lucky I felt in that job. It'd taken two solid years of trying – calling almost weekly to get to work in that studio. I didn't care that it was going to be temporary; I wanted only to get my foot into the animation door, and I did. I got into the studio that I considered the finest and had no doubt my future was going to be solid; I was in animation.

Of course, in the thirty years since I first started working at the Hubley studio I've complained often enough. Usually, a physical problem – such as money – was the culprit causing so much consternation, but I always knew it was temporary. I was always in the right place after I first walked into the Hubley Studio to work. Animation.

Today there are no Hubley studios. The likes of Tissa David and Johnny Gentilella are rare. 2D animation has been relegated to the back seat of films such as *SHREK* or *VEGGIE TALES*. The Art has been forsaken for quantity. Animation, to my eyes, has turned into a form of puppetry for the most part where these cgi objects move in time with prerecorded voices. No characters are being properly developed, and most of the stories aren't worth developing. But in all, I don't really complain about this; I just recognize it. I'm forced to try harder to do better 2D work. That's what I enjoy; that's what I believe in, and that's what I do. I also recognize that I have to support the great 2D work as much as possible and encourage more to continue with it. It's an art form that needs my support, all of our support to survive. Miyazaki, Michael Dudok de Wit, Koji Yamamura and any others we believe in have to be followed and supported.

Complaints? Animation doesn't give me reason to complain when our world is being turned upside down by a secretive coterie of radical politicians in Washington doing their best to undermine and destroy the social structure we live in. That's reason to complain. Animation is art: either it's there or it's not.



A Brief Interview with Debra Solomon

by Jose Maldonado

Debra Solomon started her artistic journey as an illustration major at Pratt Institute. She's recently completed her role as Animation Director for the sequences featured in the "Lizzie McGuire Movie." Debra's ascent from mere art student to major industry player is one that is inspiring and informative, and should cast some hopeful insight on those of us who are young and trying to get our break in the business. It was my honor and pleasure of being able to sit down and have a candid interview with her.

Jose: "So, how was the Lizzie McGuire Movie Received?"

Debra: "The Movie made back its entire production budget just in its opening weekend, amounting to 19 million dollars. At the LA Premiere I witnessed Hillary Duff (Lizzie) get mobbed by a bunch of what I call butterflies. Swarms of skinny little girls with tassels and ribbon all flailing their hands as they ran towards Hillary. It was charming and adorable. The Movie got a good review in The New York Times, and I'm happy about that."

Jose: "What are you doing now that Lizzie is over?"

Debra: "I worked on a pitch for an interactive preschool show. Pitching is something you just do again and again. Life is just an extension of the Radio Shack training manual; every tenth customer will be the one who shops, so with each rejection you get happier because you know you're one step closer to the sale!"

Jose: "What is your role as an animation director?"

Debra: "The quintessential thing about animation that I do is to take the feeling that the character has inside and surround them with it and then elevate it by making it funny. What I bring to the table is the ability to externalize emotions. The great thing about animation is that it doesn't have to make sense. If it's right and you believe in your character the audience will too."

Jose: "How has your experience been so far in the animation business?"

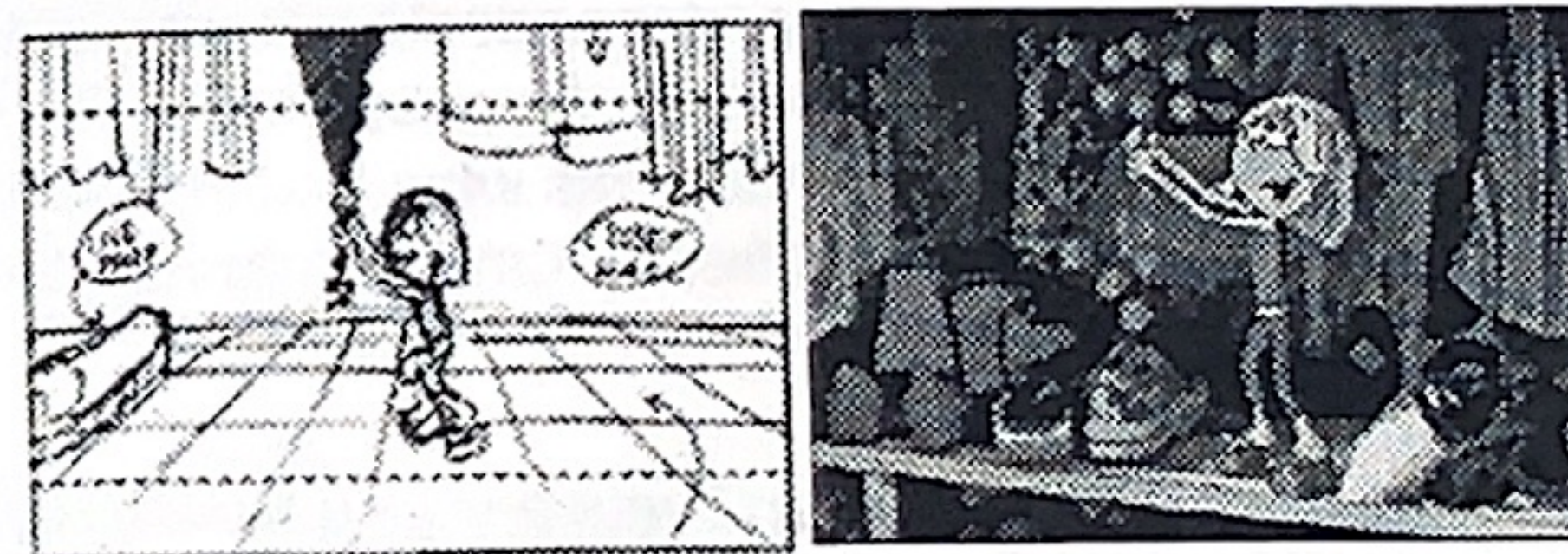
Debra: "One thing rolls into the next. When things work well you pick up more alliances. Yvette Kaplan is my oldest friend in the animation community, and we met because we worked on a storyboard together. During the creation of "Nikki" I got to work with Dave Lipson and it was the most fun I've ever had."

Jose: "So what do you think about the state of animation in New York?"

Debra: "Things are starting to happen again, like Tom [Warbuton]'s show. Lots of super talented people are here and it's just a matter of time before this cyclic down will play out. There will be a turn around. It's sort of a given."

Jose: "What is your advice or suggestions for students and anyone interested in pursuing animation?"

Debra: "When I was in art school I had a teacher named Ed Hall who spoke about how he bumped into former students and asked how their art was going. He was saddened when their usual response was that they haven't done anymore. First survive as an artist. Maintain your work, and your point of view. Work on your sketchbook; always thinking about what it is you have to say and is most important to you. Everyone else who gets work in studios doesn't necessarily work on their perspective as an artist. Your identity is the most important thing, no one can be you, you must work to maintain that. You have to find your own way. Being an artist is walking out the door and creating your own way. No one will tell you what to do. It's like everyday you're standing at the edge of a cliff and I wouldn't have it any other way. Makes it scary, but the upside is that when you live life like that, you never get old. There is always that newness for potential growth and metamorphosis as opposed to people who are on the track only to see the end of the road. The artist is always in a state of discovery, that's what makes it so exciting."



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On Lizzie McGuire, one of the things Debra did was come up with gags. Other aspects of her job included looking at animation and fine-tuning the timing and making sure that everything worked. An example of this is the movie's first animated segment. Debra says "It wasn't only about taking a good idea and fitting them into a sequence. Technicalities have to be considered like all of the names have to be a certain size and it has to fit into the situation." She also studied the room in which the first scene takes place, and made each credit happen in a different location within the room.

Be sure to check out Debra's artwork at www.DebraSolomon.com. Debra is also a featured member of Animators, Ink. You can read more about her at www.AnimatorsInk.com/Debra.html.

REMEMBERING JIM LOGAN by Tom Sito

Jim Logan died on January 13, 2003. He was in his 80's and had been suffering from complications of Parkinsons Disease. From 1941 until his retirement in 1987 he worked for Terrytoons, Fletcher Smith, Bill Sturm, Tempo, Shamus Culhanes, Academy, Focus, Pelican, Zander Animation, Parlour, Bakshi-Krantz, Lester Osterman, Paramount, Filmfair, Richard Williams, Ziggy, Hanna-Barbera and Filmation.

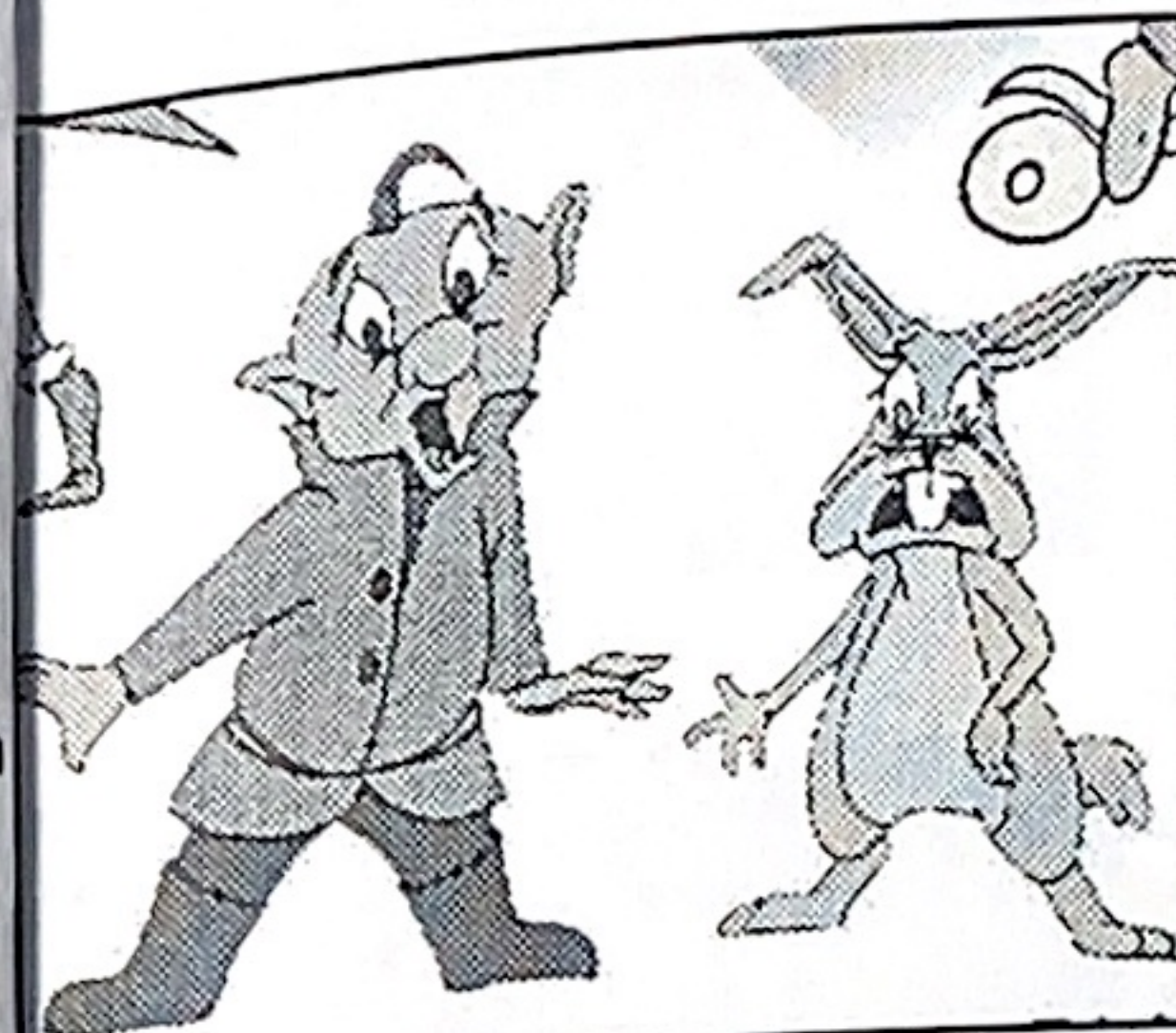
Jim was a great animator and when doing cleanup had a beautiful line line quality that was a badge of distinction before Wacoms and footage counts. In World War II, Jim was with the US Army forces stationed to help Nationalist Chinese Forces battle the Japanese invasion. He said he received his Cartoonists Guild union card while sitting in a slit trench being bombed by Zero Fighters. He would wow Chinese artists he worked with by showing them his campaign medals and a citation given him by Chiang Kai Shek. Back in the US he walked picket lines at Terrytoons in 1947 with Pepe Ruiz and Jim Tyer. Jim was also a past Vice President of the National Cartoonist Society and proudly counted among his friends Burne Hogarth, Dick Browne and Milt Caniff.

To me Jim was one of those wonderful Old Soldiers of the animation production line. A quiet, uncomplaining, dependable pro who got your films done. A gruff but kindly old dog who took young puppies like Eric Goldberg, Lou Scarborough, Rick Maki and me under his wing and showed us the ropes. In 1978 he recommended a young girl fresh from Cal Arts named Nancy Beiman to animate for Jack Zander.

In my minds eye, I can go back to when I was a young skinny student standing in awe over the shoulder of this man who was the first real professional animation artist I had ever been permitted to watch at work. The smell of the Hammerill Bond Paper and .05mm cells, the whirr of the Pencil sharpener. I wanted so much to be like him. He had the Irish twinkle in his eye and loved to laugh. All through the production of Raggedy Ann & Andy Jim had us inbetweeners in stitches with his delightful little cartoons making fun of some new incident in the office. Lester Pegues would run into our room and only have to say "A New Logan!" and we'd drop our pencils and rush to the xerox machine to laugh and get a copy.

He spent his last years retired in Florida with his beloved wife Elly by his side. Adieu Jim, Say hi for us to Tylla and Marty Taras, and I hope they let you do Gag Drawings in Heaven. Down here we'll remember to keep a rubber band twisted over the pegs to hold the paper down while you roll the drawings, because you taught us well.

ASIFA-East Festival Winners 2003



FESTIVAL OPENING
by Richard Gorey

STUDENT FILMS

1st Prize
DREAMSCAPES, Sean McBride

2nd Prize
LITTLE MOON MONSTER,
Cynthia Mazur

3rd Prize
ARK CITY, Christi Bertelsen

1st Honorable Mention
RABBIT 17 BECOMES RESTLESS,
Mike L. Mayfield



FLASHBACKS FROM MY PAST: "STARRY NIGHT"



DREAMSCAPES



IMAGINE

Charles Samu Award
FLASHBACKS FROM MY PAST:
"STARRY NIGHT", Ira Verbitsky

Charles Samu Award
Honorable Mentions
IMAGINE, Magik Studios,
Maciek Albrecht - Director
STILT WALKERS, Nat'l Film Board
of Canada, Sjaak Meilink - Director

Continued Support of Independent
Animation Award
International Film Seminars (The Flaherty)

COMMERCIALS & PROMOTIONAL FILMS

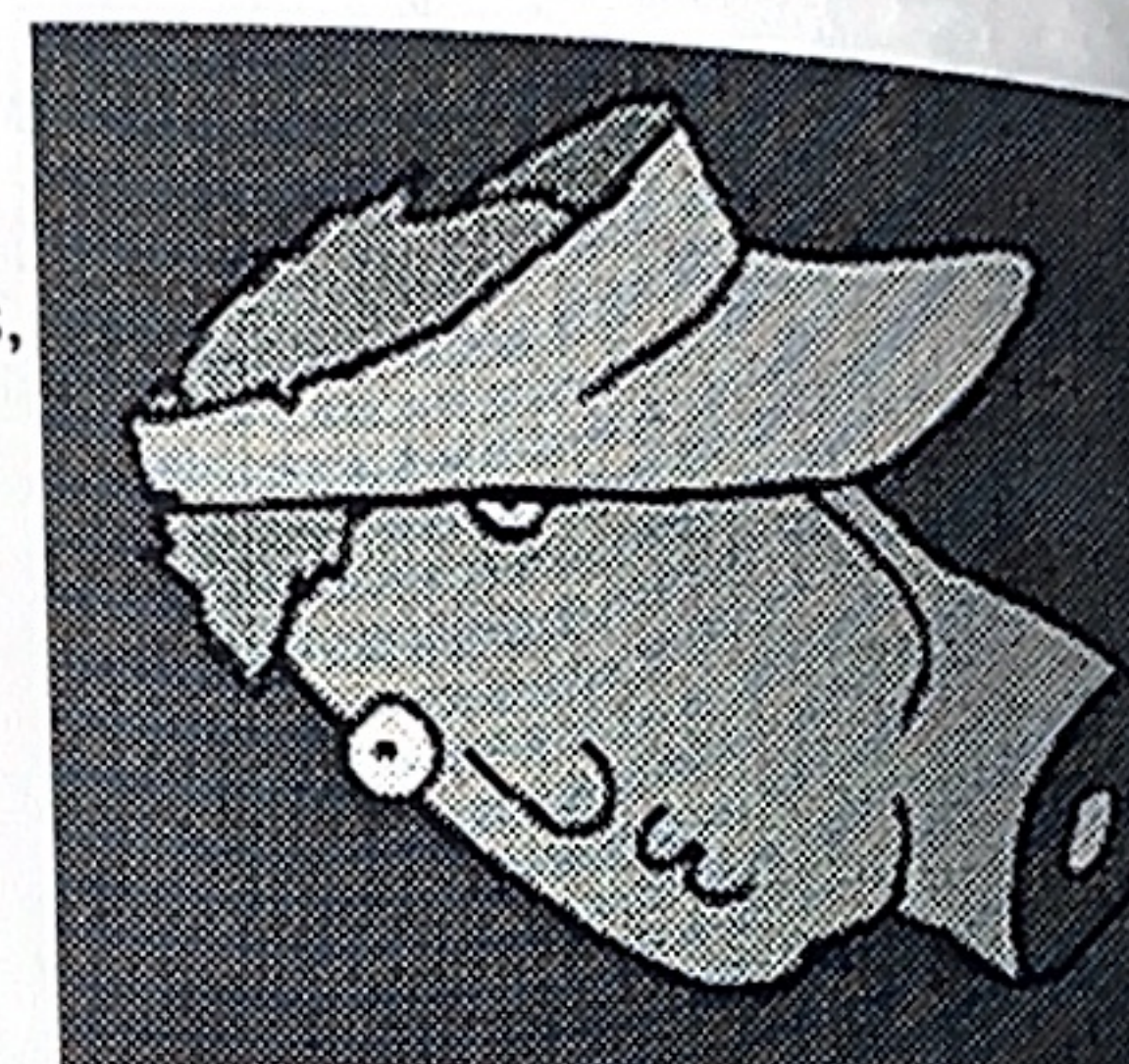
1st Prize
CHARMIN: "BLINDFOLD",
Acme Filmworks, Joanna Quinn - Director

2nd Prize
PLEASE BABY PLEASE,
Jennifer Oxley

3rd Prize
CHARMIN: "COMFY BED", Acme Filmworks,
Joanna Quinn - Director

Excellence in Design
SAMURAI JACK, Curious Pictures
BIGMOUTH US UNWIRED: "WOMAN",
Acme Filmworks

Excellence in Animation & Humor
PIONEER CAR STEREO "HEADBANGERS",
Mike Overbeck, BBDO West



PIONEER CAR STEREO
"HEADBANGERS"

SPONSORED FILMS

1st Prize
PRESIDENTS: "SEARCH",
Wachtenhiem/Marianetti Animation,
David Wachtenhiem, Robert Marianetti - Directors

2nd Prize
TURN, TURN, Magik Studios,
Maciek Albrecht - Director

3rd Prize
LINNY THE GUINEA PIG: "OCEAN" "SPACE",
Little Airplane Productions, Jennifer Oxley - Director

Excellence in Education
BLUE'S CLUES: "100TH EPISODE
CELEBRATION"
Nickelodeon/Blue's Clues

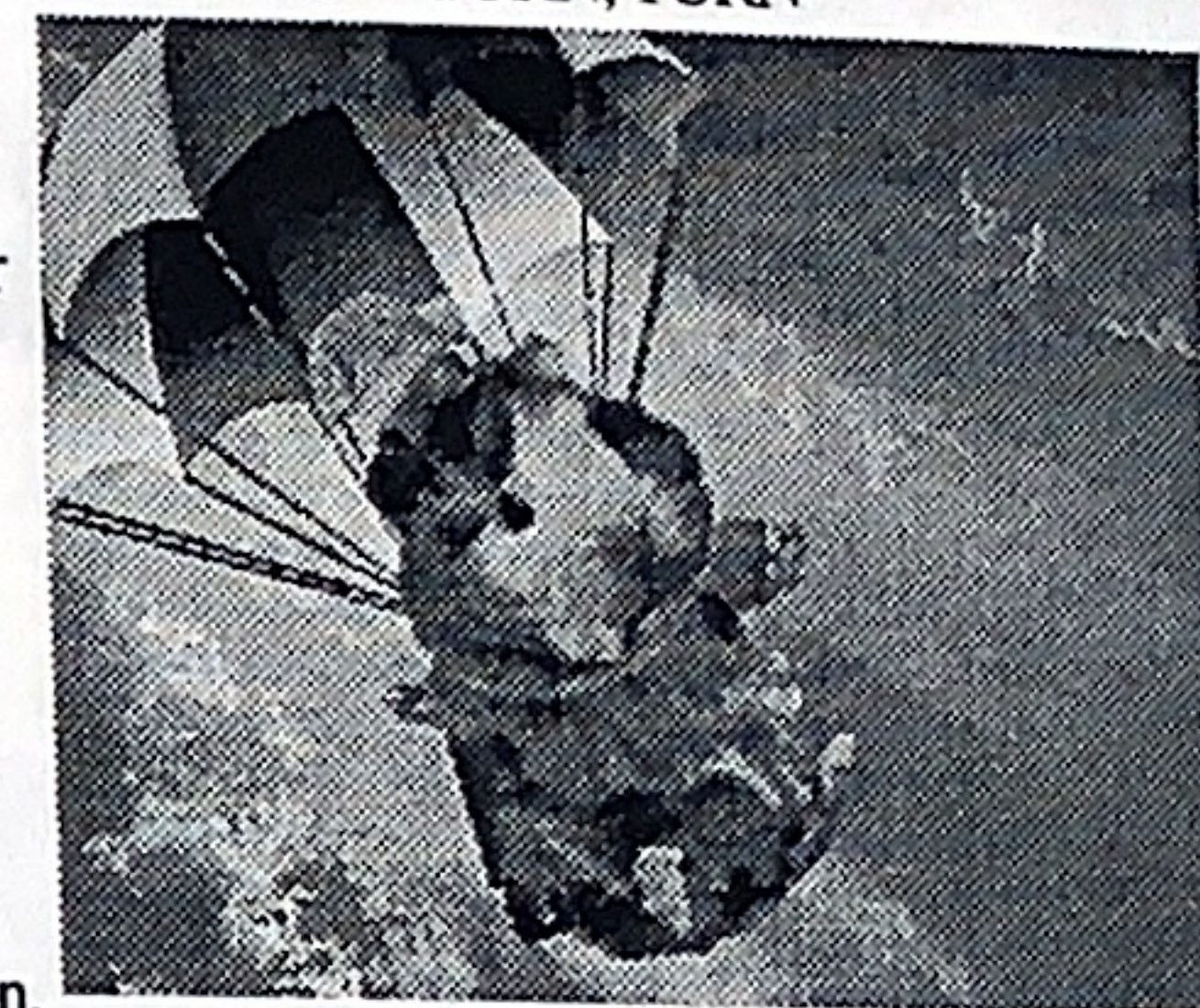
Excellence in Design
CONDOM SKILLS BUILDING, GMK Animation,
Jeremiah Dickey, Emily Hubley - Designers

Excellence in Writing/Humor
MIDTERM ELECTIONS,
JJ Sedelmaier Productions, JJ Sedelmaier - Director,
Eric Drysdale, David Javebaum - Writers

RELIGETABLES, Wachtenhiem/Marianetti
Animation, in assoc. w/ Hornet Inc.



TURN, TURN



LINNY THE GUINEA PIG:
"OCEAN" "SPACE"



MIDTERM ELECTIONS

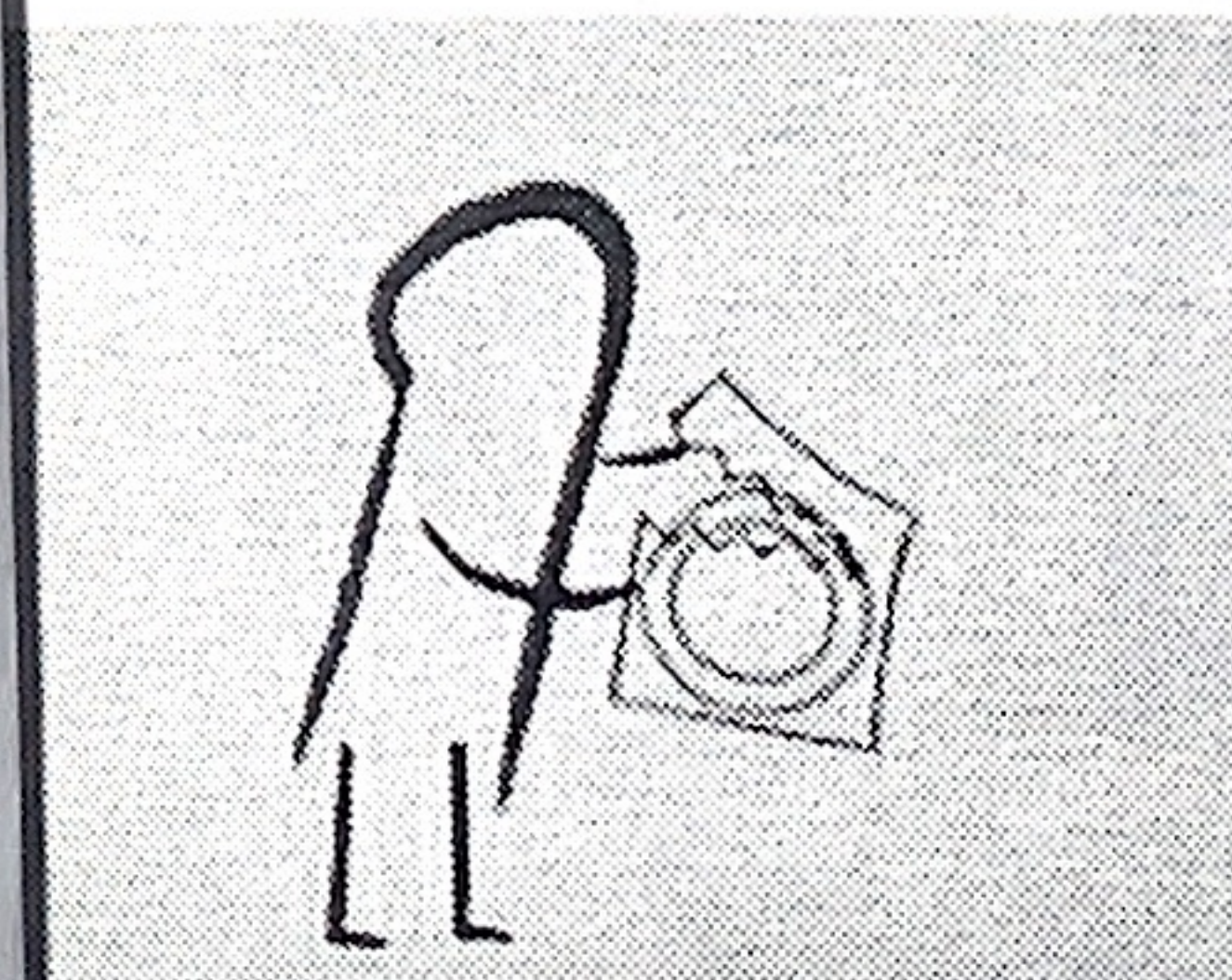


Blue's Clues
"100TH EPISODE CELEBRATION"

FREE LIFE DRAWING CLASSES

...continuing this summer
For ASIFA-East
members and SVA students

for the where and when...
Contact Toni Tysen
(212) 586-8662



CONDOM SKILLS BUILDING

INDEPENDENT FILMS

1st Prize

SIEVIETE (WOMAN)

Rija Films, Signe Bauman - Director

2nd Prize

ROOF SEX, Pes

3rd Prize

DELIVERY,

Blend Films/Patrick Smith, Patrick Smith - Director

Excellence in Experimental Techniques

CURRENT EVENTS, David Ehrlich

Excellence in Writing/Humor

THE BOX FACTORY, Fran Krause

Excellence in Design

THE MAN WITH THE SMALLEST PENIS IN EXISTENCE...

Augenblick Studios/Transfatty Inc.,
Aaron Augenblick - Designer

Excellence in Soundtrack

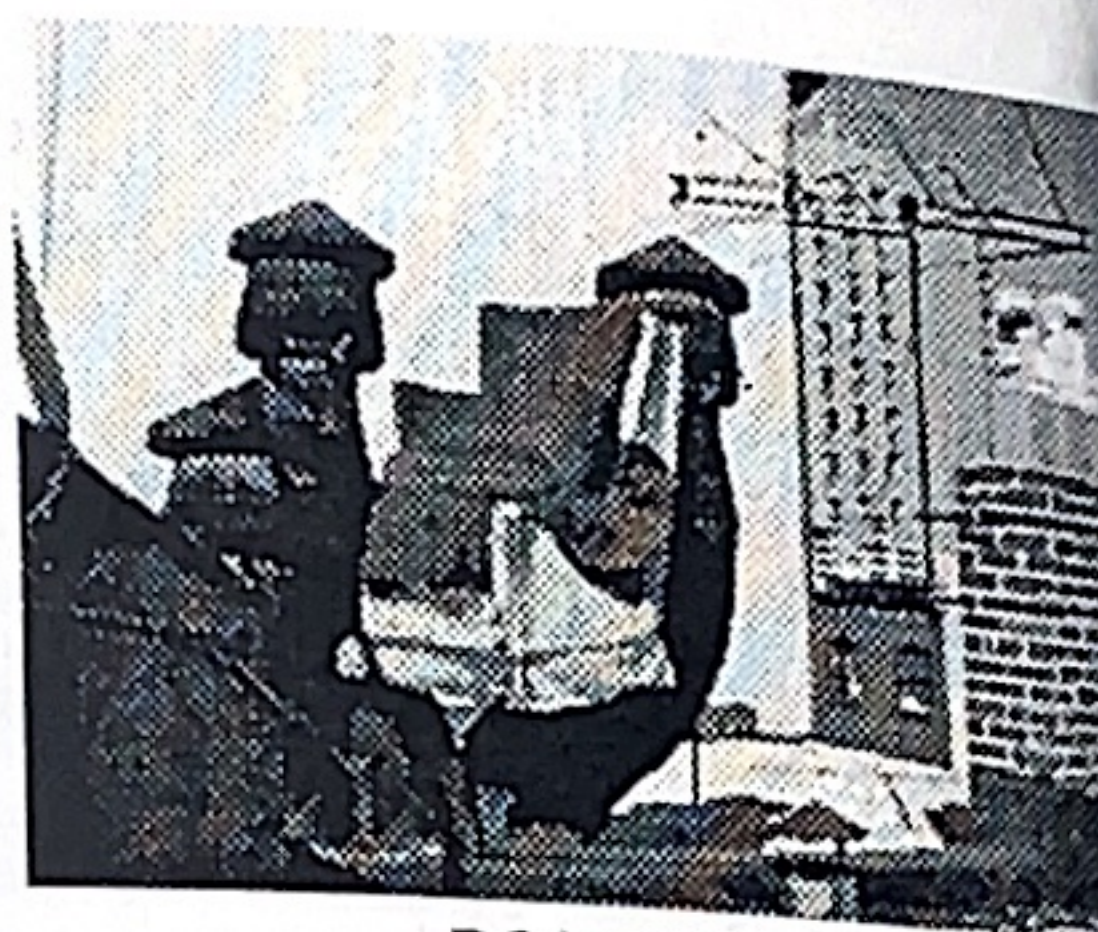
The Stone of Folly National Film Board of Canada,
Jesse Rosensweet, David Buchbinder - Composer



DELIVERY



SIEVIETE (WOMAN)



ROOF SEX

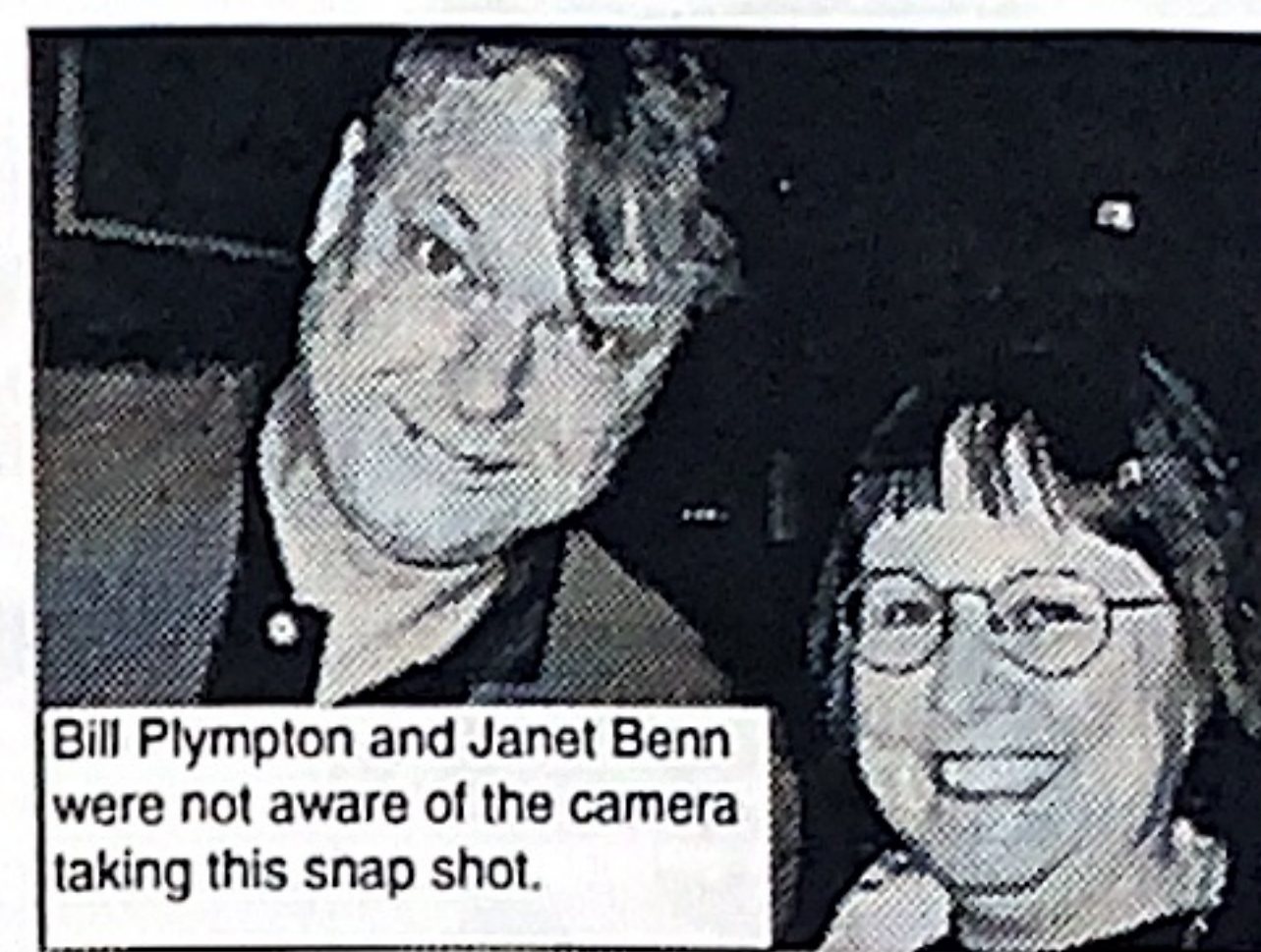
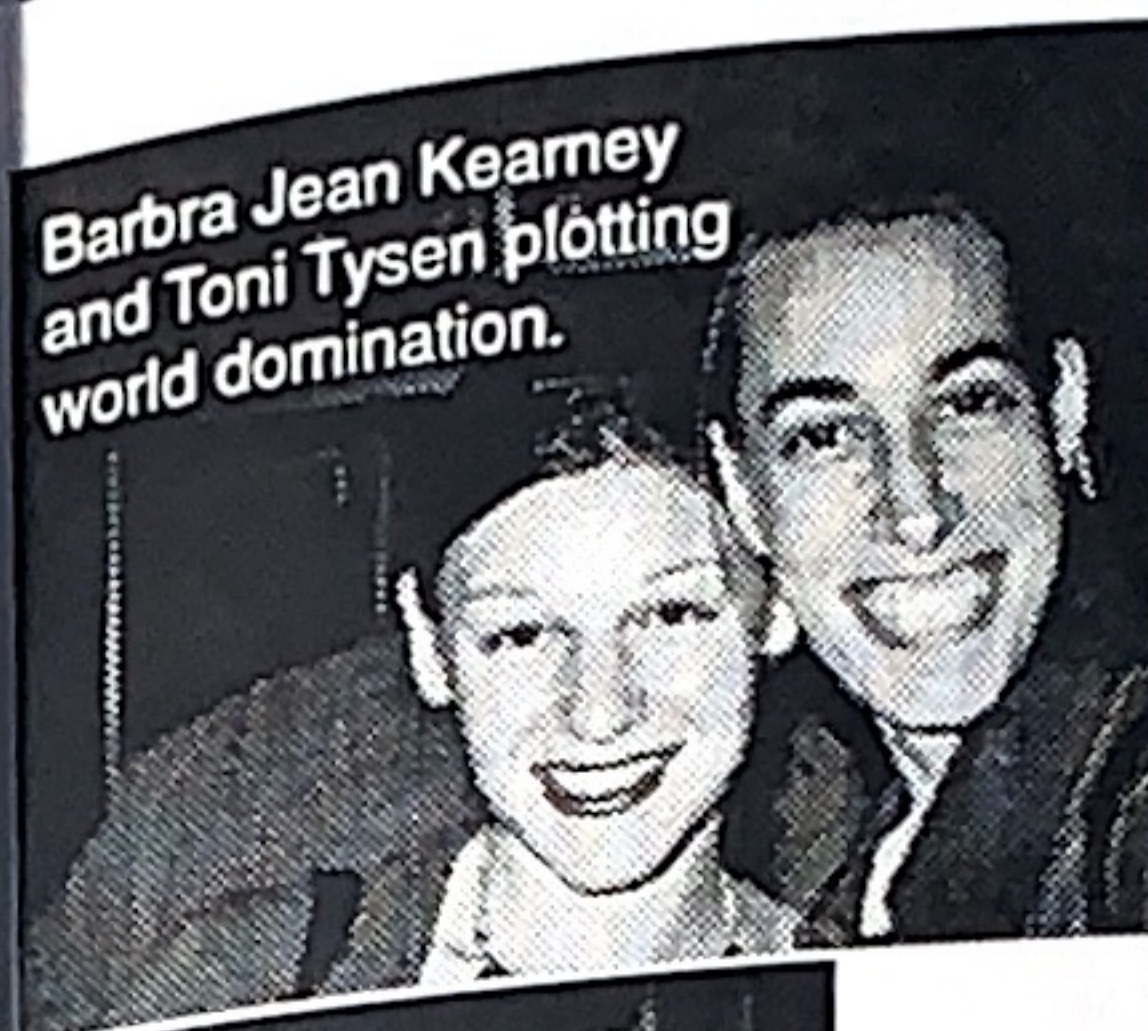


THE BOX FACTORY



CURRENT EVENTS

Barbra Jean Kearney
and Toni Tysen plotting
world domination.



Bill Plympton and Janet Benn
were not aware of the camera
taking this snap shot.

Chris Boyce demonstrates the time honored tradition
of responsible alcohol consumption.



Jeremiah Dickey
took his condom
skills to new
heights in this
years festival.
Seriously.



Olivia with Pat
"Delivery" Smith.
Pat "Delivery"
Smith and Olivia.



Christi Bertelson
& Cynthia Mazur
discuss their
inner Little Moon
Monsters and
plan a trip to
Ark City.



Festival Friends
gets festive
at the festival.
Maciek,
Dave Levy, and
Linda Simensky



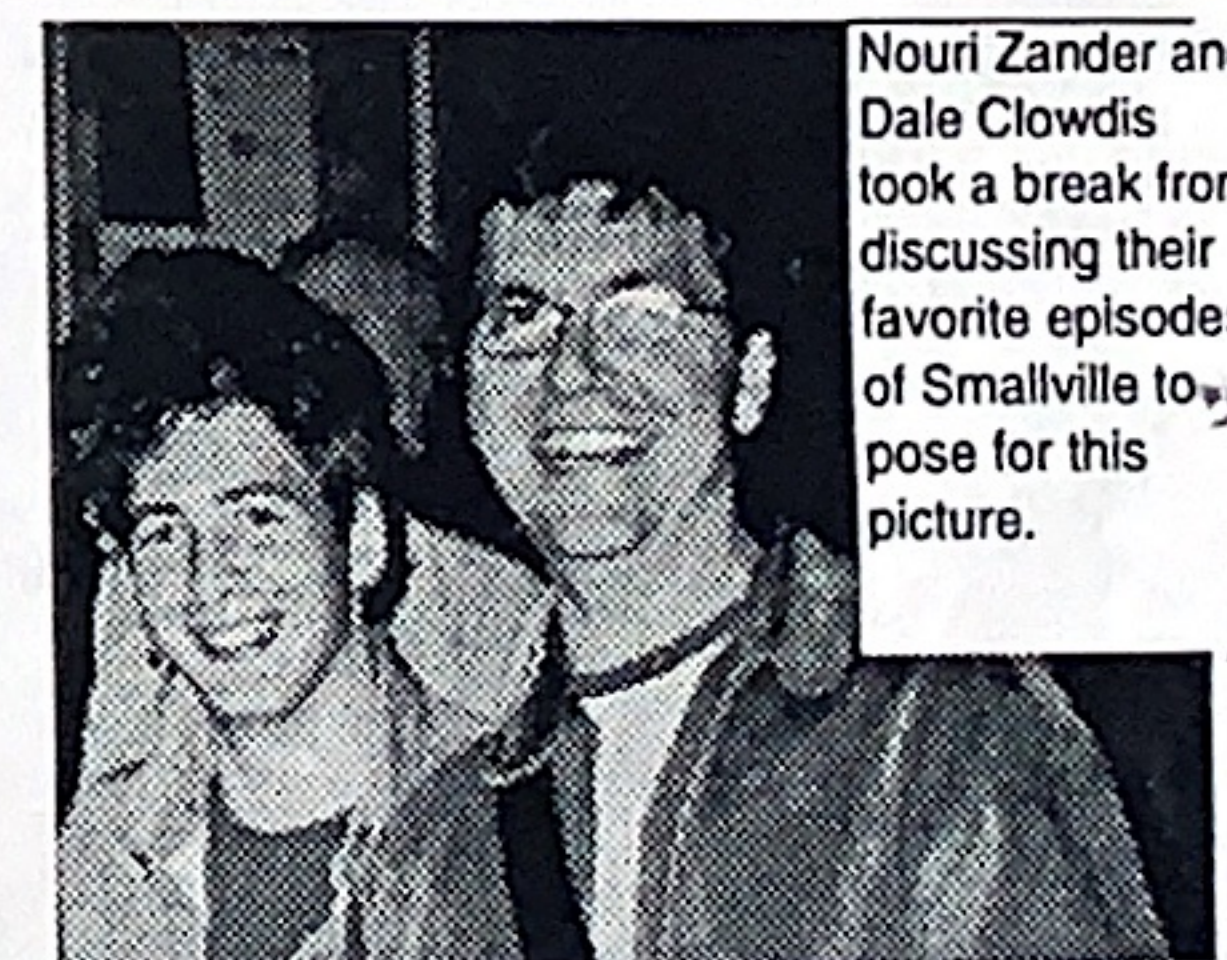
Point-
counterpoint,
with
Don Duga
and Jose
Maldonado.



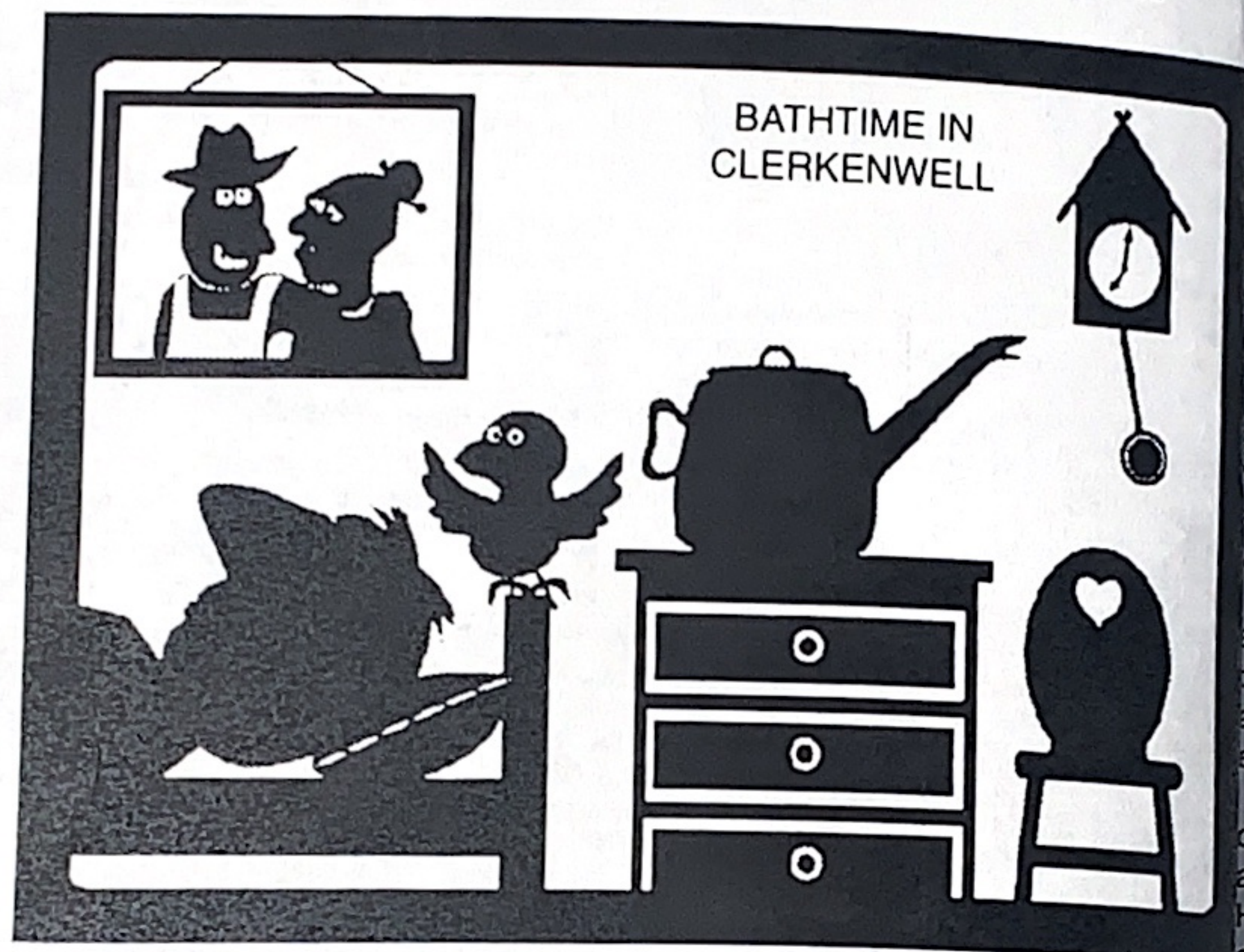
Adriane
Urquidez,
Robert
Marianetti &
David
Wachtenhlem
share a
"whoh- Bundy!"
moment.



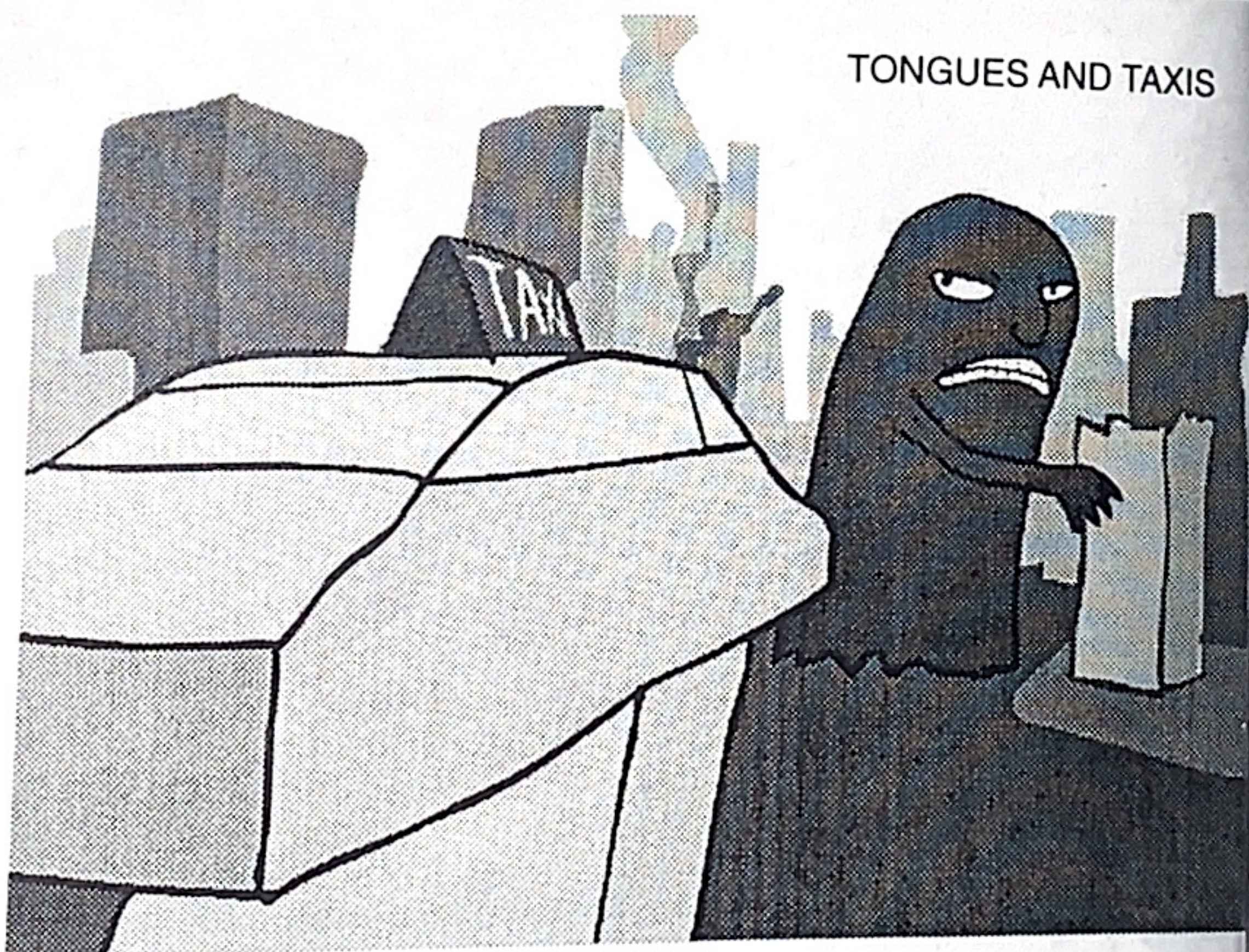
Nouri Zander and
Dale Clowdis
took a break from
discussing their
favorite episodes
of Smallville to
pose for this
picture.



Best in Show 2003
BATHTIME IN CLERKENWELL, Alex Budovsky
TONGUES AND TAXIS, Michael Overbeck

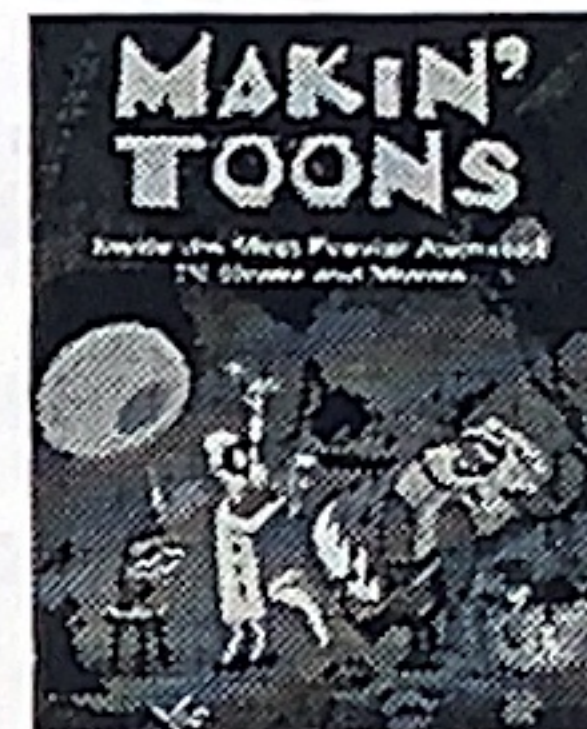


TONGUES AND TAXIS



Makin, Toons

by Allan Neuwirth



Allan Neuwirth enthusiastically opens the gate to the world of animation. . . . He covers all the important areas, the cartoonists and writers, the pencils and pixels, the music and the voices, the big hits and the near misses, with insight, clarity, and fun! Jerry Beck, author and animation historian, Cartoon Research.com

Over the last fifteen years, animation has gone through an amazing renaissance, giving birth to a new generation of creators, characters, and cinematic techniques. Allan Neuwirth, entertaining and incisive book chronicles this time of change through the accounts and images of the talented people who made it happen. Paul Dini, writer/producer, *Batman: The Animated Series*, *Batman Beyond*, and *Duck Dodgers*

Allan Neuwirth, comprehensive, fun-to-read look at the ins and outs of today, animation scene is a must for anyone interested in this fascinating, fast-evolving business and art form. . . . In addition to being a great resource, it, a blast to read for anyone who has ever enjoyed an animated show or movie (and that is almost everybody!). Ramin Zahed, editor, *Animation Magazine*.

Did you ever wonder how *Roger Rabbit* careened his way into live action? How *King of the Hill* made it to top of the heap? Or who gave *SpongeBob* his SquarePants? Meet author Gary K. Wolf, series creator Mike Judge, and *SpongeBob*, dad, Stephen Hillenburg, along with a host of other brilliant minds who have turned animation upside down, making it one of the hottest industries in entertainment today. *Makin, Toons* takes you behind the screens of your favorite shows and movies, including: *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. *The Little Mermaid*. *The Simpsons*. *Ren & Stimpy*. *Aladdin*. *The Powerpuff Girls*. *The Lion King*. *Toy Story*. *South Park*. *Shrek*. *Ice Age*. *SpongeBob SquarePants*. *Beavis and Butt-Head*. *The Tick*. *Samurai Jack*. *Batman: The Animated Series*. *Rugrats*. *Courage the Cowardly Dog*. *Monsters, Inc.*

Through vivid firsthand accounts, learn what it takes to bring toons to life, from brainstorming, writing, and animating to voicing, distribution, and promotion. Packed with unpublished sketches and photos, technical know-how, and solid career advice, this book is an invaluable resource for cartoon lovers and aspiring animation creators alike.

Allan Neuwirth is a prolific writer, producer, director, and creator/developer of animated TV shows, commercials, and comics. In addition to his award-winning work done for Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon, and Sesame Workshop, he has produced and story edited for RTV in Europe and Australia, and has written for *Courage the Cowardly Dog* and many other noted cartoon series. His syndicated comic strip, *Chelsea Boys*, appears bi-weekly in dozens of publications across the US, Canada, and the UK. He has lectured on writing for animated TV at New York University and the School of Visual Arts, and is the owner of a commercial animation company, Neuwirth Design. He lives in New York City.

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A Star is Re-Born: Cats Don't Dance

by Rich Gorey

In this issue of the newsletter, I'd like to shine the spotlight on the animated musical Cats Don't Dance- a polished, clever and entertaining cartoon released by the folks at Turner Animation in 1995. I'm guessing some of our readers have seen the film- most likely on tape. On the surface, the movie is a colorful, tuneful spoof of backstage classics like "A Star is Born", but, beneath the movie's glossy surface appeal, it's characterized by a bleak and alarmingly negative look at Hollywood stardom and the allure of fame. In its way, Cats Don't Dance may be the "Sunset Blvd." of animation: a movie that employs animal characters to expose ferocious and unpleasant truths about their all-too-human counterparts. There are lots of theories for the movie's poor showing. Some people feel an animated film without the Disney name behind it is doomed to obscurity. Others say Cats was too cynical and adult in tone: that the insatiable references to classic movies and real-life characters from that era go over kids' heads. While this may be true, many of the references in the old Warner shorts went over kids' heads, too-- but this didn't keep those films from being wildly popular.

Cats Don't Dance is a very funny movie, but its humor springs from desperation, deceit, betrayal, and the ugly reality behind the insidious lie that is the "Hollywood Dream". Danny, the talented, affable, and incredibly naive hero of the movie, could never be truly happy in the vile sewer the movie presents Hollywood to be. Danny must wind up defeating the villainous child star Darla Dimples, but in the end, he will still have to deal with Darla's boss L.B. Mammoth - a far more powerful character than Danny's triumph at the film's conclusion- the overdue recognition of his talent- doesn't alter the fact that his future career will always be driven by the likes and dislikes of a capricious public. (Presented in the movie as something fickle, mob-like and largely stupid.)

Danny's first view of Hollywood, gleaming like the Aurora Borealis in the hills ahead of him, mirrors his naïve view of life in the movies. The streets are literally paved with gold, the sun rises like a jewel over the Graumann's Chinese Theater, and celebrities litter the streets (in several witty caricatures that call to mind the Warner cartoons of the thirties and forties).

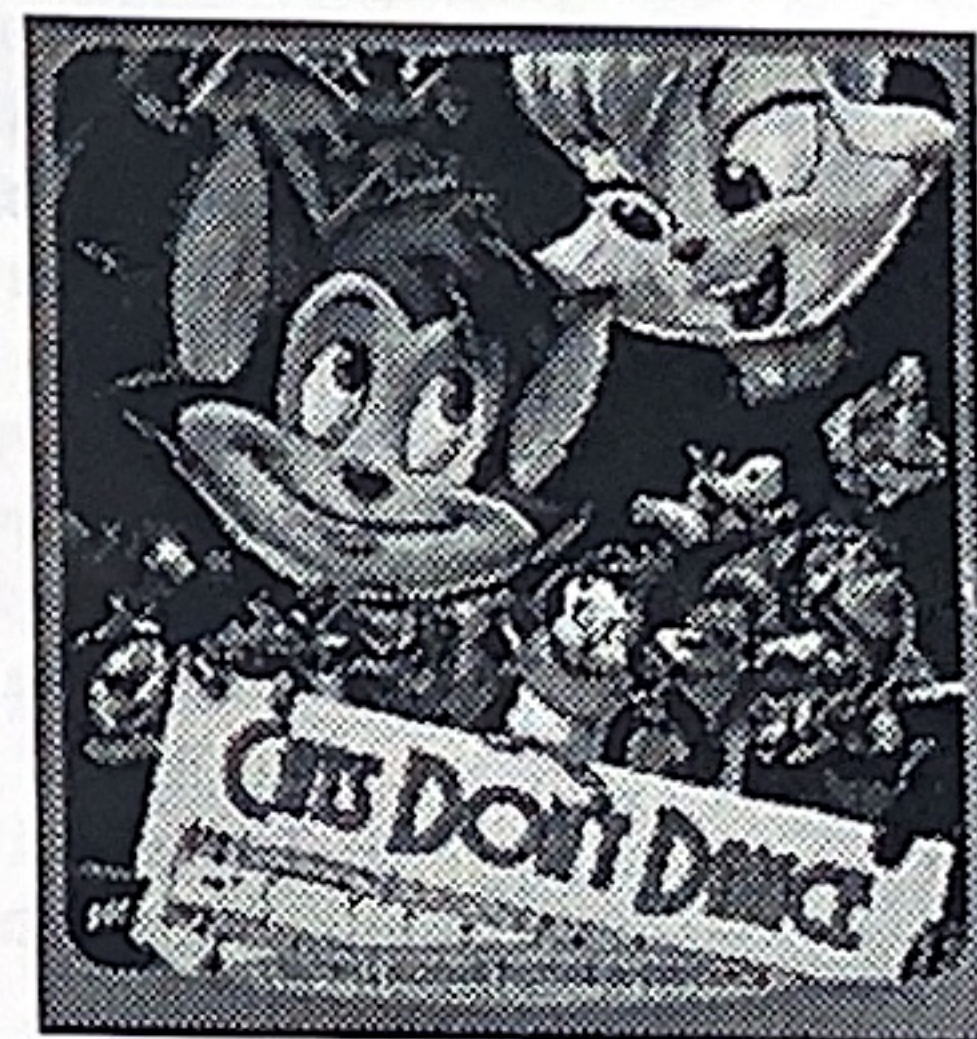
The characters Danny encounters on his first day are all fringe-dwellers in Hollywood, and have the scars to prove it. Pudge, the penguin, wants desperately to be in the movies, but is stuck delivering ice to the catering trucks instead. Frances, a fish (voiced by Cruella DeVil actress Betty Lou Gerson) gets parts-- "if you call hanging from a hook a good part," and Sawyer, the pretty female cat who always wanted to be a singer, has been relegated to filing and answering phones in the offices of Farley Wink, a odious animal agent. Early on, Danny makes a fool of himself by trying to hog the spotlight from the monstrous child star Darla Dimples. But is Danny really so different from Darla, in the end? Both want to be famous, and both believe stardom is their birthright. At one point, Darla sings: "I didn't get where I am today, by letting myself get pushed around..." She at least understands the rule of the jungle that is behind stardom: never give an inch. There's always someone behind you ready to topple you from that precarious perch. Danny's talent and ambition make him Darla's enemy: it doesn't matter that he's a nice guy: there's only room for one at the very top. In order for Danny (or anyone else) to succeed, Darla will have to fail. It's the Hollywood way. Naturally the movie can't end with everyone sharing the spotlight- though it tries to imply this.

The fact that Danny wants stardom so badly makes him blind to Darla's duplicity and betrayal: in a way, he is his own worst enemy. In trying to buck the system by circumventing the "paying your dues" part of the equation, Danny sows the seed for his ruin- and the ruin of his fellow performers.

Darla's extraordinary stardom and popularity are shown from the beginning of the film to be a sham: a carefully-tended lie the studio sells to a gullible public (including the eager-to-believe Danny). But to perpetuate the charade, hundreds of sycophants and hangers-on must endure Darla's heinous mistreatment. The movie wallows in this cruelty, showing several examples of the humiliations suffered by Darla's victims: directors, make-up men and women, co-stars-- even fans. Though her butler, the towering Max, is more physically intimidating (and may have scared some of the small children who went to see the film in the theaters) it is Darla who is the real monster- a monster created with the willing cooperation of the very people she torments. The characters in Cats Don't Dance are willing to tolerate anything, ANYTHING, to be stars, or even to travel in the dubious company of the stars themselves. Danny and his animal pals literally go through hell and high water before getting their big break. True to the movie's theme of lying and cheating, this "break" comes at the price of a deceitful trick- the theft of the guest list to the premiere of Darla's musical epic "Li'l Ark Angel. It's satisfying to see Darla taken down in the movie's frenzied finale, but Danny has had to lie and manipulate events to steal the limelight-- at an event that legitimately belongs to Darla in the first place.

Early on, Darla sets Danny up for his fall by suggesting slyly to him that: "You don't have to be good- but you had better be Big and Loud." The song is one of the hilarious highlights of the film, in which the prepubescent child star vamps and grinds her way through a ghastly, oddly sexual musical extravaganza in the privacy of her own living room. Pianos and effete showboys spring out of the floor: Darla uses these as stepping stones in her act. Ironically, though Danny's first audition is a shambles because of Darla's interference, his finale at the premiere succeeds for the very reason Darla has insisted it will: it is "big and loud", thanks in large part to her thwarted attempts to sabotage the enterprise. Yes, Danny and company have dazzled with their songs and dancing, but the statement made by the filmmakers seems to imply that audiences will respond to anything, provided it assaults them into submission. The film's ending scene, supposedly a triumphant montage of movie posters with the animals featured in spoofs of popular films, seems strangely double-edged. While the animals go on to star in legitimate classics like Casablanca, they also appear in animal versions of "Grumpy old Men", "Twister", "Free Willy", and "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles". All Warner Bros. Films, of course, and all box office hits, but also all "Big and Loud" films whose artistic merits are questionable, at best.

Along the way, the bitter realities of the class system are skewered in some clever gags. The doorman who chases Danny away from the Brown Derby pauses to pose for a picture with Laurel and Hardy: everyone in Hollywood wants to be an actor. (Today it seems everyone has a screenplay.) Even little Toto dreams of playing the star part, not the faithful dog. His "borrowing" Dorothy's shoes is a wonderful metaphor for the allure of stardom and the feeling that "looking the part" guarantees success in Hollywood. But nothing is what it seems, of course. The greedy agent Farley might have a part for the lamb in the new Moses picture, but when the



excited sheep bounces up and down in his chair, Sawyer discovers the part calls for "A SACRIFICIAL lamb", and the bloom is off the rose. Sure, the movies THEMSELVES may be fake, but the "sacrifice" part is all too real. Danny, naturally, sees nothing of this dark side, and the movie remains engaging and appealing because the filmmakers chose wisely to keep Danny innocent throughout. When, after his disastrous debut, Sawyer asks Danny, "Why are you so determined to make a fool of yourself?" Danny answers "I just want to do the thing that I love. Doesn't everyone?" It's so heartfelt and sincere, and so true on its face, that Sawyer can only respond sadly, "It's not that simple." "It should be," Danny insists, and we can see Sawyer, on the inside, agrees with him. Though the movie spoofs the heartlessness and betrayal of Hollywood, it more effectively lampoons the lie of the movies themselves. Darla's opening number, from her Biblical Musical, "Li'l Ark Angel" is an utter scream, with the hellish child lowered on a rope into a cardboard version of the great flood: we see two unicorns waving goodbye as they sink below the studio-made waves. But the number turns out to be a real disaster for quite another reason: God may have been angry- causing the flood- but the real "sin" is stepping outside of the lines and trying to hog the spotlight.

The idea that the evil sidekick is larger by many times that the actual villain is a clever one, and Darla's relationship with the oddly-subservient Max is one of the movie's comedic treats. Though she seems to be based in design and character on famous thirties icon Shirley Temple, Darla more resembles Rhoda Penmark, the child murderess from the classic thriller The Bad Seed. In fact, the real Shirley Temple, by all accounts, actually was as sweet and affable as the characters she played onscreen- making Darla's evil side something delightfully unexpected to see. Her reprise of "Big and Loud" in the privacy of her cavernous boudoir is a surreal moment of gothic excess. Like the punishing flood of Noah's Ark, Darla sends the wind and rain down upon the heads of the animals whose "sin" has been bucking the social order. In effect, Danny and the others have "defied the gods" (stars like Darla, who were Gods in Hollywood) by refusing to acknowledge their place. "Okay, learn the hard way," Sawyer warns the unsuspecting Danny, when he suggests trying to grab some of the limelight, and Darla's revenge is quite "Old Testament", with the crashing of temples, the destruction of the studio, and the humiliation of studio boss L.B. Mammoth. Darla's power, despite her butler, is not physical strength: it's the hold she has over the fawning crowds who do her bidding. It's the astonishingly potent power of stardom. She moves with the force of a hurricane, and is always at the center of a frenzy of activity. She's discovered that the key to success is noise and distraction, and yet she is never more evil and dangerous than in her quieter moments. A tiny caricature of the imposing personality of celebrities like Joan Crawford and Judy Garland, Darla is the central figure in a cold, angry, and devastating movie about how stardom itself is a monster we have little control over. It's fitting that the last shot of the film is not of Danny and his pals, but of the now-reduced Darla, sweeping up around the studio. We suspect that despite her diminished circumstances, she may just be the comeback kid, and in a world as jaded and urbane as the one director Mark Dindal has created, it's not too much of a stretch to think Darla may be just the thing Danny's next movie may need.

Credit goes to Sandy Russell Gartin for the original story material, expanded upon by writers Mark Dindall, Kevin Yasuda, and Rick Schneider. The film is full of attractive colors, lush settings, and animation that is as energetic as the work in Aladdin. Credit for the movie's appealing look goes to Brian McEntee, who managed to give the cartoon Hollywood a surface veneer but also a hidden darkness that occasionally intrudes. That Cats Don't Dance manages to be colorful, funny, tuneful, & ferociously cruel at the same time is quite an achievement. It skirts the edges of something terribly sad and desperate, but manages to leave the audience with a feeling they've just experienced something positive. And Isn't that, in the end, what the movies are all about?

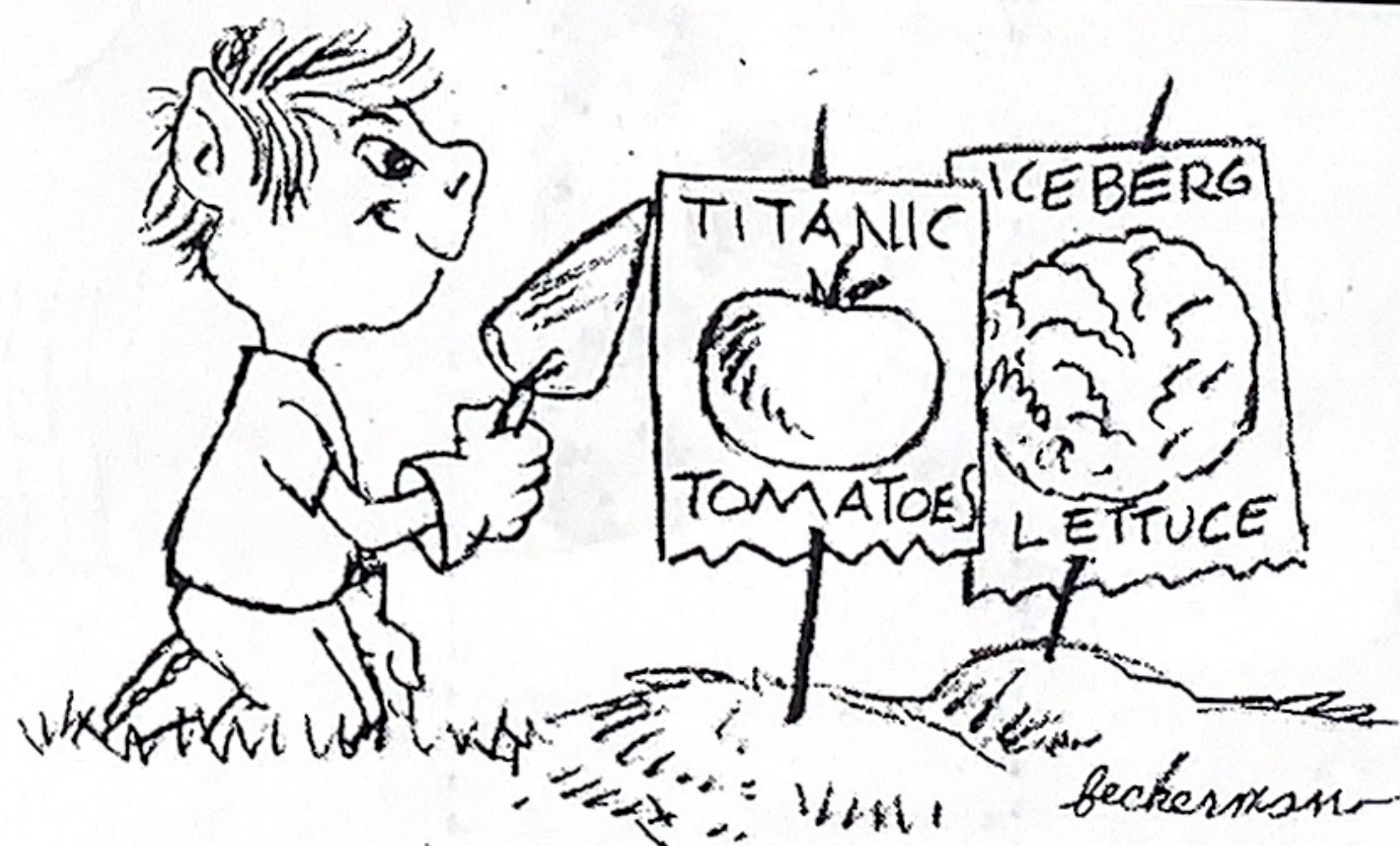


The MoCCA Art Festival will take place on Sunday, June 22 at the Puck Building, 293 Lafayette St. in New York City. The event is to raise money and awareness for the Museum of Comic and Cartoon Art, admission will be available at the door. Featured guest is Art Spiegelman, and in addition to Bill Plympton, exhibiting professionals include Evan Dorkin, Kaz, Peter Kuper, Patrick McDonnell, Mike Mignola, Frank Miller, Jimmy Palmiotti, Ted Rall, Jeff Smith, and Mo Willems.

Bill Plympton will appear in a panel discussion on animation at 5:15 pm.
<http://www.moccany.org/events-festival-03.html>



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